

Eric G. Wilson, *Dream-Child: A Life of Charles Lamb*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. 521. £25. ISBN 9780300230802.

A volume of ‘Elia’ essays in a Hampstead sublet led Eric G. Wilson to quirky essayist Charles Lamb (author also of poetry, drama, and personal letters). Wilson returned to ‘Elia’ in a workshop on ‘literary nonfiction’ (xiv) and the rest is history—or at least biography.

Inspired by Lamb’s ‘freaky prose’ (xiv), Wilson plunges us into the world of eighteenth-century London in this account of Lamb’s life, with the second person singular ‘you’ in his ‘Introduction: Between Eden and Fleet’. Grants underwrote generous, quality illustrations. The biography (*not* in the second person) summons up similarly vivid scenes of ‘The Temple’, ‘Christ’s Hospital’ (the ‘blue coat school’ where Lamb met life-long friend and interlocutor Coleridge), and Lamb’s work at his odious day-job at the East India House/Company in the chapter ‘East India’. The latter chapter speculates on the moral dilemma of this colonialist enterprise—which was not outwardly troubling to Lamb so much as his enslavement to the tedious work of the grind Monday through Saturday, with very few holidays and one week’s leave a year! The public, masculine world of the first chapters yields to the Lambs’ family life with the murder of their mother Elizabeth Lamb.

The closeness of the siblings Mary and Charles, their co-produced creative work, and their often-shared dwellings, lead Wilson to explore the sibling relationship. Notably, Chapter 5, ‘Day of Horrors’, recounts Mary’s murder of their mother and wounding of their father John in a fit of insanity. Despite the tragedy, Charles managed to provide compassionate care for his sister, who had intermittent experiences of ‘madness’, but often thrived in shared domiciles with her brother. Charles himself suffered from depression and alcoholism and was institutionalised once, but had to pull himself together to provide for his remaining family.

The short, concise chapter titles (and chapters themselves, which range from 25 pages long to mostly shorter—sometimes only 3 pages) cover an active life with concision. Some chapters evoke famous friendships (in which Lamb, despite being burdened by his job, held his own) with people like Coleridge, the Wordsworths, Southey, and Leigh Hunt (Ch. 8 ‘Divine Chit-Chat’; Ch. 9 ‘Nether Stowey’; Ch. 16 ‘Godwin’). Other chapters explore Lamb’s writing (Ch. 10 ‘*Blank Verse*’; Ch. 20 ‘Journalism’; Ch. 28 ‘*Tales from Shakespear*’; Ch. 29 ‘*Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*’; Ch. 38 ‘*The London Magazine*’, and the related Ch. 39 ‘Elia’; Ch. 42 ‘Imperfect Sympathies’; and Ch. 48 the more ephemeral ‘*Album Verses*’). In this brevity, how much does Wilson cater to the short attention span of today’s readers?

Dream-Child, while a serious biography, does not bog one down with scholarly exegesis. Playful prose, however, sometimes distracts—as when Wilson calls William Blake’s brother’s hosier establishment, the locale of the exhibition of his works Blake held in 1809, a ‘sock shop’ (409). Just as the reader might be flagging in reading Wilson’s account (Lamb’s drinking, though a way of coping—and ultimately fatal, in a way, because he died as a result of a quite possibly tipsy fall—becomes irritating), some revelations naturally arise in this chronicle: Lamb’s infatuation with and marriage proposal to the young actress Frances Kelly, and his close relationship to his and Mary’s ward, Emma Isola. Psychoanalytic speculation is evident, for instance, with the Emma/Moxon marriage episode. In Chapter 41, ‘Emma’, Wilson speculates that Charles may have been erotically fixated on Emma Isola but declares ‘Lamb’s own words argue against any romantic longings on his part’ (387). Perhaps coyly, he concludes the speculative chapter (which muses about Charles’ apparent distress over Emma’s engagement, and Mary’s own mental breakdown immediately relieved by the announcement of Emma’s

marriage to Moxon): ‘The nature of Charles’s relationship to Emma must remain a mystery’ (387).

Dream-Child begins with a Preface outlining perhaps the worst insult Lamb ever suffered, one which he could do nothing about because he was dead: being dismissed by mid-twentieth century critics—made worse by the fact that it was the 100th anniversary of Lamb’s death in 1934. It began with Denys Thompson, colleague of F. R. Leavis. Despite this culmination of literary politics, Wilson leaves out today’s culture wars. New Historicism still seems to dominate: such Lamb essays as ‘The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers’ and ‘The South-Sea House’ are found in British Literature anthologies like the Norton and Broadview, along with Lamb’s letters, addressed to fellow writers and intellectuals of the day. To his credit, though Lamb’s poetry gets little attention these days, Wilson examines it. It’s disappointing that the book ends with Lamb’s death and not his literary and critical resurrection, but perhaps that would be premature.

Wilson’s contemporaneous style itself questions whether Charles Lamb—with the 250th anniversary of his birth this year—will find readers in our time, despite his biographer’s arguments to the contrary. Such biographies as *Dream-Child* may be the only things that can renew contemporary interest in the literary work of the Lambs by sparking interest in their lives.

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